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ABSTRACT

This article describes "Words in Your Ear," a vocabulary learning program for tertiary Chinese students who are learners of English at the University of Hong Kong, noting the University's 3-year partnership agreement with IBM to provide notebook computers to first-year students and provide new collaborative research opportunities for faculty. With "Words in Your Ear," students can access a text, together with a range of information about individual vocabulary items, including English meaning, Chinese translation, and pronunciation. "Words in Your Ear" allows students to select the information they require to help them learn unfamiliar words in context. It is also a research tool to establish which dictionary look-up procedures are most effective. On completion of the tutorial, students can work on three sets of exercises to assess their knowledge of the target words. Feedback is provided. Research indicates that most consider "Words in Your Ear" beneficial. The program is being further developed to incorporate a bank of texts from various disciplines for access as a Web-based learning tool. (SM)

ENGLISH VOCABULARY FOR CHINESE LEARNERS: WORDS IN YOUR EAR

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THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG (HKU) and IBM China/Hong Kong Ltd have signed a three-year partnership agreement to provide notebook computers to HKU first-year students, and provide new collaborative research opportunities for academic staff. This partnership is part of the University's long-range goal to create a state-of-the-art 'digital campus' in which all students and staff have access to computing power and network tools and resources from anywhere, on or off campus.

SO FAR 90% OF HKU FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS have taken the opportunity to participate in the programme, making a selection of one of three models of IBM ThinkPad computers which are being offered at substantial discounts. As part of creating the 'digital campus', an environment rich with IT tools and resources, the University's Computer Centre is installing an additional 4,000 network access points across campus from which students will be able to log-on to HKU Intranet and the Internet. It is also upgrading modem pools to improve access from off-campus.

TREMENDOUS EFFORT HAS BEEN PUT INTO CREATING AN IT CAMPUS and consequently many course materials have been rewritten to take advantage of the new technology and network connections. In the English Centre, many of the courses have been redeveloped with the web in mind, including "Words in Your Ear", a vocabulary learning programme for tertiary students. Students can access a text, together with a range of information about individual vocabulary items including English meaning, Chinese translation and pronunciation. While sound is a basic component of most software programmes nowadays, its use is particularly appropriate for Chinese learners of English in Hong Kong, many of whom are more familiar with only the written form. "Words in your ear" has a dual purpose: it is primarily a teaching tool for Chinese tertiary learners who wish to develop their English vocabulary, as it allows learners to select the information they require to help them learn unfamiliar words in context. Secondly, it is a research tool to establish which dictionary look-up procedures are most effective:

the programme tracks every mouse click, noting in a separate log each item of information selected by the learners.

SINCE CHINESE IS READ BY CHARACTER RECOGNITION, some Cantonese native speakers tend to rely on using a similar process to recognise written English words. While this can be useful in reading familiar words, students can be confused when it comes to unfamiliar words as they have not learned to 'sound out' words written in an alphabetic script. It is common for Chinese students to be unaware of the pronunciation of many of the new words they come across in their text books, and so this programme aims to fill the gap. Research has shown that Cantonese speakers and other second language learners of English, can remember unfamiliar words better if they are able to hear the pronunciation on first encounter.

THE AUTHORING TOOL used for developing the original version of the programme was Macromind Authorware 3.0 with which a CD ROM was produced. Several simpler programmes were tested and rejected because they did not permit the incorporation of a log in which to store the data. As a key focus of this program was to track the information sought by the learners, a more powerful authoring program was required and Authorware met the specifications. A newer version is being developed for access from the web. An overview of the design can be seen at <http://stli.com/stli/mmgall/maniapps/>. Students log in to the system and are then shown a selection of words which pre testing has shown are unlikely to be familiar. They are asked to type in the meaning of any words they know as this allows the teacher to find out whether or not the words are already known. The screen displays a short academic text of about 150 words in which twelve target words are highlighted in red. Students can select words by clicking on them and then choosing the information they need to help them learn the word. Optional information is provided in the form of the meaning in Chinese characters, English dictionary definition, pronunciation in the form of a digitised voice recording (aiff file), root and 'extra information' such as the phonetic script, irregular past tenses, prepositions which follow the word, related meanings and other semantic and syntactic details.

ON COMPLETION OF THE TUTORIAL PHASE, students are invited to complete three sets of exercises to assess their knowledge of the target words. At the end of each exercise, they can opt to continue, quit or return to the tutorial for further input. The first test aims to measure the students'

comprehension of the target words. Feedback is provided in the form of the English meaning and the learners are also able to hear the word pronounced again if they wish. The second exercise involves matching target words with given meanings. Students are required to 'drag' a target word and 'drop' it into a box if it matches the meaning shown on screen, and again feedback is provided for incorrect matches. The final test is a cloze exercise in which learners are asked to complete the gap with one of the twelve target words and feedback is provided after three incorrect responses. The degree of task difficulty increases with each exercise. Meanwhile the log tracks every mouse click so that researchers can identify which information is selected in learning new words, which is the most effective, and which exercises are most useful for reinforcing word learning.

REASSURINGLY, 97% OF THE STUDENTS COMMENTED FAVOURABLY on the programme and recommended further development. This encouraging feedback may, however, simply be due to the novelty value of the material and to the learners' perception that it has been customised for them as Hong Kong University students. Those who were not impressed by it complained that, being PC users, they were not familiar with the Macintosh environment, while others were simply not comfortable with the computer as a learning tool. It is hoped that this year's new students will rapidly develop IT skills in the first weeks of the semester and will take advantage of the new online materials that have been written for them.

"WORDS IN YOUR EAR" HAS BEEN USED BY AROUND 200 STUDENTS at the University of Hong Kong and is now being further developed to incorporate a bank of texts from a variety of disciplines for access as a web based learning tool. Graphics and short videos will be included if they are useful for enhancing the comprehension of the words, for example with medical or architectural terms.

THE ADVANTAGE OF MULTIMEDIA VOCABULARY LEARNING is that learners who have access to a computer can set their own learning pace and the computer will not be critical of their responses. Students can hear the words repeatedly and test themselves as often as they wish. Provided that the exercises and texts are presented in a clear and interesting manner, Hong Kong learners are generally motivated towards autonomous learning which is also considered a part of their English enhancement courses. Teachers need not feel that they are becoming redundant - far from it. Face to face contact will remain a part of education as teachers are still the nucleus of presenting, explaining and clarifying a multitude of

points. Computers can, however, provide excellent support and reinforcement of the learning process.

A BASIC DILEMMA, HOWEVER, SURROUNDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS MATERIAL: how to balance teaching duties with the time and technological support required to produce CALL materials. Producing interesting online courses means more than simply uploading existing handouts to a web page. It is often assumed that multimedia programmes are developed by nerds over a weekend or two. Many people do not appreciate how time consuming it can be for a relative novice to produce even a simple web page. Language teachers are trained in classroom teaching skills; they are not trained as web masters although they are now encouraged to develop online materials. A frequent complaint is that there is insufficient time available to develop course materials in between classroom teaching, administration and marking assignments. Many teachers would welcome the opportunity to try creating online courses, but lack the technological know how and the time to learn. More technical support would enable teachers to collaborate with experienced programmers to create relevant, interesting and motivating courses.

Monica Hill

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Monica Hill<mmhill@hkucc.hku.hk> has been teaching English enhancement courses at the English Centre of the University of Hong Kong for eight years. Her research interests are vocabulary acquisition and developing CALL materials. She is currently working on two other web based vocabulary learning programmes: "Words on the Web" which is a WebCT based course for first year students at the University of Hong, and "The Web of Words", geared towards secondary school EFL students who wish to increase their English vocabulary prior to university entrance. Monica presented a paper on this topic at the EdTech98 conference in Perth in July this year. - Ed.]